Of Maternal Uncles and Māngalik Brides: Śakuni in the Folk Narrations of The Mahābhārata

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Of Maternal Uncles and *Māngalik* Brides: Śakuni in the Folk Narrations of The Mahābhārata

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Abstract
The timelessness of *The Mahābhārata* lies in its ability to re-invent itself, thereby giving the society a chance to re-negotiate, revise, and revive the discourse. It also gives the so called 'villains of the piece', well established in the 'rogues' gallery', a chance to redeem themselves. One such character is Śakuni, the 'shrewd' maternal uncle of the Kauravas, whose negative image in Vyāsa's textual universe is questioned by the folk renditions of the grand epic. The Oriyā *Mahābhārata* by Saralā Das views Śakuni not as the master conspirator who brought about the great war, but as a victim who suffered because of the court politics of the Kauravas. The strong popular culture that supports him is also evident in the narratives of the Kalbeliās of Rajasthan, and in the folk renderings of the epic in Kerala. This makes us reflect as to why the meta-narrative has vilified Śakuni and treated him with contempt when the folk traditions view him in a more charitable light, or at least give him the benefit of doubt. This paper utilizes narrative research methods to understand the dehumanization of Śakuni in the dominant discourse. It employs the postmodern theories of psychoanalytical criticism and deconstruction in the study of the petite narratives associated with Śakuni to facilitate engagement, plurality, and divergence in the discourse. The paper attempts to read the chronicles of self, society, and social justice in these lesser-known narratives to liberate Śakuni from his filial debt and relocate him in the discursive universe.

Keywords: *The Mahābhārata*, Śakuni, discursive, petite narratives, oral tradition, plurality, social justice

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1. Introduction

The image of Śakuni as a villain is well-entrenched in Vyāsa's textual universe, to the extent that his name has become a common noun for a crooked, wily person. The 'lame uncle' of B.R. Chopra's magnum opus, expertly assayed by Gufi Paintal, captured the imagination of viewers, and dominated the national television in 1988. The TV series portrayed Śakuni as the stereotypical antihero who pledged to bring about the destruction of the Pāndavas. His devious acts included the poisoning of child Bhīma, the burning of the Palace of Lac to eliminate all the Pāndavas, and the initiation of the infamous dice game that led to the disrobing of Draupadī and the loss of the

kingdom for Yudhiṣṭhira. Yet a close reading of the enigmatic character of Śakuni in the folk versions and the re-tellings of *The Mahābhārata* indicates that he has probably not been given due credit in the dominant discourse. The petite-narratives, i.e., the folktales, the tribal dance performances and the songs based on the local traditions, look beyond the stereotypical, fiendish image of Śakuni and to assess his role as a faithful son and brother who could not forget the trauma of loss and the gross betrayal of his trust. This paper evaluates the folk, tribal and other narratives to unravel an alternative discourse that subverts the established notions of villainy associated with Śakuni in the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*. The paper utilizes the postmodern theories of Psychoanalytical Criticism and Deconstruction to facilitate engagement, plurality, and divergence in the study of Śakuni as a much maligned, and vastly misunderstood epic character.

2. Ableism and the Kārmic Conceptualization of Disability

In the Sanskrit version of *The Mahābhārata*, Śakuni appears as a wily, unscrupulous person who cheated the Pāndavas in the game of dice and won in a dishonest manner. As the 'doctored' dice followed the commands of Śakuni, the Pāndavas lost their property, their Kingdom and, ultimately, themselves. They had to bear the ultimate humiliation when Draupadī, their common wife, was staked and lost in the game of dice. As the disheveled, menstruating Draupadī was dragged into the Kaurava court, she begged for deliverance. Story goes that Duḥśāsana, one of the Kaurava brothers, sought to undress Draupadī by divesting her of her 'sarī' (an unstiched, six-yard drape worn by women in the Indian sub-continent), but he was unsuccessful because of her sincere prayers to Lord Kṛṣṇa, who lengthened the garment endlessly, and kept her honor in the open Kaurava court. The epic says:

ततो दुःशासनो राजन्द्रौपद्या वसनं बलात् |

सभामध्ये समाक्षिप्य व्यपक्रष्टुं प्रचक्रमे ||४०||

आकृष्यमाणे वसने द्रौपद्यास्तु विशां पते |

तद्रूपमपरं वस्त्रं प्रादुरासीदनेकशः ||४१||

ततो हलहलाशब्दस्तत्रासीद्घोरनिस्वनः |

तददभुततमं लोके वीक्ष्य सर्वमहीक्षिताम् ||४२|| *The Mahābhārata* 1.00.40-42 (Sukthankar, 1966).

Then, O king, forcibly seizing Draupadī 's attire before the eyes of all, began to drag it off her person. And while Yajñasenī was crying aloud, the illustrious Dharma, remaining unseen, covered her with excellent clothes of many hues. And, O monarch, as the attire of Draupadī was being dragged, after one was taken off, another of the same kind, appeared covering her. And thus, did it continue till many clothes were seen. And O exalted one, owing to the protection of Dharma, hundreds upon hundreds of robes of many hues came off Draupadī 's person. And there arose then a deep uproar of many many voices. *The Mahābhārata*, Book 2: Sabhā Parva: Śiśupāla-vadha Parva: Section LXVI (Ganguli, 1896).

The epic says that Śakuni, Duryodhana's maternal uncle, was the perpetrator of the sordid act as it was on his insistence that Yudhiṣṭhira had pledged Draupadī:

शकुनिरुवाच||

अस्ति वै ते प्रिया देवी ग्लह एकोऽपराजितः |

पणस्व कृष्णां पाञ्चालीं तयात्मानं पुनर्जय ||३१|| *The Mahābhārata* 1.00.31 (Sukthankar, 1966).

The son of Suvala then, addressing Yudhiṣṭhira said, --'O king, there is still one stake dear to thee that is still unwon. Stake thou Kṛiṣhṇa, the princess of Panchala. By her, win thyself back. *The Mahābhārata*, Book 2: Sabhā Parva: Śiśupāla-vadha Parva: Section LXIV (Ganguli, 1896).

This wasn't the only time when Śakuni had wrongly counselled the Kauravas. Earlier, when the brothers were young, he had tried to poison Bhīma, who survived because of his super-human prowess:

ततो दुर्योधनः क्रूरः कर्णश्च सहसौबलः |

तेषां निग्रहनिर्वासान्विविधांस्ते समाचरन् ||८||

ददावथ विषं पापो भीमाय धृतराष्ट्रजः |

जरयामास तद्वीरः सहान्नेन वृकोदरः ||९|

प्रमाणकोट्यां संसुप्तं पुनर्बद्ध्वा वृकोदरम् |

तोयेषु भीमं गङ्गायाः प्रक्षिप्य पुरमाव्रजत् ||१०|| *The Mahābhārata* 1: 55: 8-10 (Sukthankar,1966).

Then the wicked Duryodhana, guided by the counsels of Śakuni (his maternal uncle), persecuted the Pāndavas in various ways for the acquirement of undisputed sovereignty. The wicked son of Dhṛtarāṣtra gave poison to Bhīma, but Bhīma of the stomach of the wolf digested the poison with the food. Then the wretch again tied the sleeping Bhīma on the margin of the Ganges and casting him into the water, went away. *The Mahābhārata*, Book 1: Ādi Parva: Ādivansavatarana Parva: Section LXI (Ganguli, 1896).

Śakuni also attempted to burn to death all the Pāndavas and their mother Kuntī in the 'Lākshā Griha' (House of Lac). The list of his transgressions is long:

प्रमाणकोट्यां शयनं कालकूटस्य भोजनम् |

दशनं चाहिभिः कष्टं दाहं च जतुवेश्मनि ||१२||

द्यूतेन राज्यहरणमरण्ये वसतिश्च या |

इष्वस्त्राणि च सङ्ग्रामेष्वसुखानि च वेश्मनि ||१३||

दुःखान्येतानि जानीमो न सुखानि कदाचन |

धृतराष्ट्रस्य दौरात्म्यात्सपुत्रस्य सदा वयम् ||१४||

The Mahābhārata 8:60: 12-14 (Sukthankar, 1966).

Bhīma said: Our sleep at the palace at Pramanakoti, the administration of deadly poison to our food, the bites of black cobras, the setting fire to the house of lac, the robbing of our kingdom by gambling, our exile in the woods, the cruel seizure of Draupadī 's beautiful tresses, the strokes of shafts and weapons in battle, our miseries at home, the

other kinds of sufferings we endured at Virāta's abode, all these woes borne by us through the counsels of Śakuni and Duryodhana and Radha's son, proceeded from thee as their cause. *The Mahābhārata*, Book 8: Karna Parva: Section LXXXIV (Ganguli, 1896).

The epic further ascribes the blame to Śakuni:

दुर्योधनो मन्युमयो महाद्रुमः; स्कन्धः कर्णः शकुनिस्तस्य शाखाः |

दुःशासनः पुष्पफले समृद्धे; मूलं राजा धृतराष्ट्रोऽमनीषी ||६५||

The Mahābhārata 1.1. 65 (Sukthankar, 1966).

According to *The Mahābhārata,* Duryodhana was the great tree of anger, Karna was its trunk, Śakuni the branches, Duhśāsana its fruits and flowers, and the ignorant King Dhṛtarāṣṭra its root. The entire masterplan of sending the Pāndavas to the forest for 12 years, and one year of going incognito was crafted by Śakuni:

शकुनिरुवाच||

वयं द्वादश वर्षाणि युष्माभिर्द्यूतनिर्जिताः |

प्रविशेम महारण्यं रौरवाजिनवाससः ||९||

त्रयोदशं च सजने अज्ञाताः परिवत्सरम् |

ज्ञाताश्च पुनरन्यानि वने वर्षाणि द्वादश ||१०||

अनेन व्यवसायेन सहास्माभिर्युधिष्ठिर |

अक्षानुप्त्वा पुनर्द्यूतमेहि दीव्यस्व भारत ||१३||

The Mahābhārata 2.67. 9-13 (Sukthankar, 1966).

Sakuni then said--'The old king hath given ye back all your wealth. That is well. But O bull of the Bharata race, listen to me, there is a stake of great value. Either defeated by ye at dice, dressed in deerskins we shall enter the great forest and live there for twelve years passing the whole of the thirteenth year in some inhabited region, unrecognized, and if recognized return to an exile of another twelve years; or vanquished by us, dressed in deer skins ye shall, with Kṛṣṇa, live for twelve years in the woods passing the whole of the thirteenth year unrecognized, in some inhabited region. If recognized, an exile of another twelve years is to be the consequence. On the expiry of the thirteenth year, each is to have his kingdom surrendered by the other. O Yudhiṣthira, with this resolution, play with us, O Bharata, casting the dice. *The Mahābhārata*, Book 2: Sabhā Parva: Sisupala badha Parva: Section LXXV (Ganguli, 1896).

Śakuni informed Duryodhana that it was impossible to defeat the Panadavas in a fair battle, hence deceit was the only option. He knew that Yudhiṣthira would not refuse a game of dice because of his Kshatriya chivalry. *The Mahābhārata* records the tense moments when the die was cast, and Draupadī was won by Śakuni on behalf of Duryodhana. The humiliation of Draupadī led to Bhīma's death threat to Duhśāsana and laid the background of the war:

मा ह स्म सुकृताँल्लोकानगच्छेत्पार्थो वृकोदरः | यदि वक्षसि भित्त्वा ते न पिबेच्छोणितं रणे ||२१||

धार्तराष्ट्रान्रणे हत्वा मिषतां सर्वधन्विनाम् | शमं गन्तास्मि नचिरात्सत्यमेतद्ब्रवीमि वः ||२२||

The Mahābhārata 2:68: 21-22 (Sukthankar, 1966).

I tell thee that if Vrikodara, the son of Pritha, drinketh not thy lifeblood, piercing open thy breast in battle, let him not attain to regions of blessedness, I tell thee truly that by slaying the sons of Dhṛtarāṣtra in battle, before the very eyes of all the warriors, I shall pacify this wrath of mine soon enough. *The Mahābhārata*, Sabhā Parva, Section LXXVIII (Ganguli, 1896).

Thus, we see that the Sanskrit version of the grand epic portrays Śakuni as a scheming rogue and a miscreant. However, we come across other versions of the epic that are not so harsh on him. Prominent among them is a 15th century ground-breaking work in Oriya, written by Poet Saralā Das, which presents Śakuni in an entirely different perspective (Patnaik, 2012, p.2). Condensing the oral versions recited by the bards in the rural settings in Orissa, 'Shūdra Kavi' Saralā Das reveals a different side of Śakuni - one entirely dissimilar to that indicated by the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*. Saralā Das views Śakuni as the traumatized son of Subala, the King of Gāndhāra, who was unjustly incarcerated and slaughtered by the crown prince Duryodhana. Das's work narrates the tragic saga of love and loss experienced by Śakuni, whose father and siblings were unjustly consigned to the Kaurava dungeons. Subala the dying father, extracted a deadly promise from his son Śakuni - that he will decimate the Kuru clan to avenge his sire's death. Patnaik (2012) brings out the helplessness of Subala, the King of Gāndhāra, who was accused of deceit and misdemeanor, imprisoned, and subsequently starved to death along with his sons, an act that left a lasting and devastating impact on the mind of young Śakuni (p.3). Duryodhana had his own reasons for being angry with Subala. He was livid because he felt cheated by King Subala, whose 'mangalik' daughter Gāndhāri was married to Dhṛtarāṣtra in an act of deceit. To mitigate the planetary 'dośa', Gāndhāri had been married to a Sāhadā tree before her marriage with Dhṛtarāṣtra (Patnaik, 2012, p.10). The tree was cut down after the marriage to save Dhṛtarāṣtra, the groom, from the ire of the gods. But this made Duryodhana 'the son of a widow', and he blamed Subala for this grave humiliation. To avenge the insult and to settle scores, he invited Subala and his hundred sons to the Kaurava capital for a celebration. As soon as they arrived, they were interred in a dungeon, tortured, and kept on one grain of rice a day. When death was imminent, King Subala asked his other sons to give away their share to Śakuni, the eldest, so that he lived on to take revenge from Duryodhana (Patnaik, 2012, p. 11). The *Saaralaa Mahābhārata* reports that in the throes of death, Śakuni was kicked by his father on the shin, which made him orthopedically challenged, leading to the popular depictions of him as one who walked with a pronounced limp. This image of Śakuni, the 'lame maternal uncle', was perpetuated, giving him a vile reputation, as disability was perceived as a curse for bad Karma of previous births.

Satpathy and Nayak indicate that though Saralā Das himself had initiated 'startling changes' in the mythography of the epic, what he did was in keeping with the principles of reproduction laid down in the Sanskrit text (Satpathy & Nayak, 2014, p.8). The authors point out that variations in the putative, 'original' text may have been made while 'copying out, adding and deleting lines due to exigencies of memory, comprehension or sensibility' (Satpathy & Nayak, 2014, p.8). They posit that the account of Saralā's *Mahābhārata* as a text can examine the most sophisticated theories originating from the western world and establish that the progression of *The Mahābhārata* owes

its vivacity "to the lack of closure or fortitude, made possible through its invitation to re-rendering" (Satpathy & Nayak, 2014, p.11).

Chaturvedi (2019) assesses the marginalization of disabled people culturally and contextually and draws our attention to the fact that disabled people are spoken in terms of their specific disability and are seen as 'faulty' or 'damaged' (p. 67). He points out that the Kārmic conceptualization of disability is wrong because it privileges ableism and stigmatizes a normal, physical condition. He reminds us of other characters in the same predicament, i.e. Mantharā, the dwarf, who was blamed for poisoning Queen Kaikeyi's mind in *The Rāmāyana*, Dhṛtarāṣtra, the father of Duryodhana, who was denied the throne because he was blind, Kubjā, the hunch-back, who was rescued by Kṛṣṇa and made 'normal' once again. Alakshmi, the disabled elder sister of Lakshmi, was rejected in marriage by Vishnu (Chaturvedi, 2019, p.71). The putative narrative contributed to the formulation of the social discourse of marginalization, establishing a causal relationship between disability and evil, as happened in the case of Śakuni and the other physically challenged characters mentioned above. Karma and debility were inextricably linked with destiny, and disability was seen as a curse or retribution. If one indulged in good karma in this birth, it guaranteed a disability free next birth. Karmic causation and fate made disability akin to taking a test - one that was flunked by Śakuni, the 'lame' uncle, in *The Mahābhārata*. We are reminded of sage Ashtāvakra, who was born disabled - he was bent at eight different parts of his body because of the 'curse' of his father.

We find the concept of disability connected to the violation of morality, and the culture of physical fitness in society furthers the gap between the 'disabled' and the 'non-disabled'. Chaturvedi postulates that the disabled should not be passive recipients of cultural notions which regard them as lacking something, hence not normal, or incomplete. He regrets that scholars have not given sufficient attention to the multi-layered perspective that is needed to understand the phenomena of disability. "Karma is a cultural construct which occupies a central position in the Hindu belief system and aims to reproduce a moral order that sees disability in a negative light", says Chaturvedi (2019, p.71). Śakuni, the disabled uncle, who limped his way to infamy, is a figure burnt in the memory of TV viewers of the 80s - a role expertly assayed by Goofy Paintal, whose deliberately negative body-presence further accentuated what was initiated in Vyasa's Mahābhārata. Poruthiyil draws our attention to the Kantian notions of reflecting judgements, which offer a strategy to reduce the risks of wrong lessons being drawn from religious epics, and caution against the merit of utilizing the religious literary texts like *The Mahābhārata* or *The Gitā* for unverified extraction of moral lessons (2012, p.78).

Referring to the Codices 771 and 772 preserved in the National Library at Braga in Portugal, Bhembre reiterates the need to be open-minded in the discourse (2005, p. 173). Written by Krishandas Sharma in Konkani in the late 15th century, these codices treat the *Mahabharata* characters as human, and view them with all their flaws and foibles. The oral traditions of the Konkan region also portray the epic characters as fallible and subject to change (Bhembre, 2005, p. 173). Performed collectively by the tribal communities of the Konkan region during festivals, these folk renditions (called Banvād and Gudulyā Kanni) follow the storyline of the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*, but the messages are localized and indigenized. The trans-creators do not hesitate in bringing together the epic characters and local characters in the same narrative. In one such narration, Śakuni, portrayed in a dubious, wavering role, looks around for an accomplice to burn

the House of Lac down. He approaches a poor barber with the request, but is turned down by him, only to be accepted by a rich businessman whose morals are suspect. Bhembre posits that the invention of this story by the re-creators and the trans-creators is a comment upon the society of their times (2005, p.174). A poor person need not necessarily be dishonest, or a rich person truthful, as we see in the story. "This tradition of rationalization through transcreation and re-creation continues to the modern literature, and it is likely to be carried on in future with added vigor," says Bhembre (2005, p.175).

3. The Youngest of One Hundred Ghosts

Gogoi's Śakuni asks Duryodhana as to why their destinies are so inextricably interlinked. He reminds Duryodhana that the Kaurava scion was the eldest of one hundred alive, whereas Śakuni was the youngest of one hundred ghosts (Gogoi, 2006, p. 111). Śakuni questions Duryodhana's false bravado and reminds him that the so called 'Kshatriya Dharma' and fair play are mere words, used at random to assuage the Kauravas' guilt. He asks:

> Incredible, Duryodhana, incredible! At times even devil is also capable of quoting scriptures! All these days what have you been practicing, my dear? When I cast the doctored dice, where did you lock away your integrity? (Gogoi, 2006, p. 111)

Gogoi shares an interesting narrative where Kṛṣṇa askes Śakuni as to whose defeat does he desire in the Kurukshetra war. Kṛṣṇa inquires: "Living off the generosity of the Kauravas, being such a close confidant of Duryodhana, why did you take to treachery (Gogoi, 2006, p. 145)?" The God condemns Śakuni as heartless, but he questions this verdict. He asks Kṛṣṇa as to what slip he discovered in Śakuni's sense of duty, and how he was different from Yadupati himself in desiring the ruin of the Kauravas. When Shalya, the commander of the Kuru forces, asks Śakuni about his gameplan, Śakuni says:

> What I'm up to? You want to know what I am up to? Have you not heard me lamenting, sitting amongst hundred corpses? When I cast the dice made of my father's bone, you could not understand then? (Gogoi, 2006, p.147)

In a final goodbye to Duryodhana, Śakuni rages:

> Consigning to your dark prison cell you led my family of one hundred brothers along with my father to a gruesome death by starvation. I have to settle my score today with an eye for eye, leading your 99 little brothers to ghastly death, leaving the age weary blind Dhṛtarāṣtra to burn himself alive...... My duty is fulfilled today. (Gogoi, 2006, p. 148)

Śakuni's final words bring out the pathos and the irony of the entire situation. Even as he gets beheaded by Sahadeva on the battlefield, he exults that he has reduced Duryodhana to the state of a beggar on the streets and has not left Bharat green anymore. He claims that for him, death is salvation. As the cold steel pierces his heart, Śakuni laughs and exclaims: "What a pleasure, ah! Pleasure, Pleasure!" (Gogoi, 2006, p. 148) This was the pleasure of a job done well, even at the cost of one's life. The pain of remaining alive was perhaps more agonizing than death for Śakuni, the much-maligned, vastly mis-understood character in the grand epic.

Frasca (1998) draws our attention to the sacralization of the dice game played by Śakuni (p. 9). He observes that Terukkūttu, the evocative religious theatre form of Tamil Nadu, powerfully re-enacts episodes from the Tamil versions of *The Mahābhārata*. The dice game, an integral and prominent part of Terukkūttu, intensifies the religious overtones of the performance and the aspect of play involved in it. "Certainly, the conjuring of the various sacred presences through dance, music and above all, percussion, as well as the Dance of Possession (sacred entrancement) by Śakuni are evidence of this, as are the various occurrences of 'Āvesham' that take place at a number of points in the performance", says he (Frasca, 1998, p. 9). He notes the Tamilized names used in the performance, i.e., Śakuni as 'Cakuni', Duryodhana as 'Turiyotanan', Dharmaraja as 'Tarumaraja', Bhīma as 'Piman', and Draupadī as 'Tiraupatai'. Śakuni is seen here as a comic figure who tries to convince Yudhiṣṭhira that the dice game was in sheer humour and not serious wager. In the heat of the game, as the dice is being rolled one final time, a dancing Śakuni exults:

> For Śakuni who lives by the concept
>
> That injustice is protection
>
> And the unjust are victorious
>
> What fear is there? (Frasca, 1998, p. 24)

It is as if Śakuni is elated about getting closer to his goal with help from the gods who are being propitiated – an objective which is greater than just making Duryodhana win the war. As the performance progresses, Śakuni and the other characters are in a constant state of banter with the Kattiyankaran (jester, herald, clown), who establishes a close connection between the "ritually powerful epic world of the Terukkuttu enactment and the contemporary world of the audience", says Frasca (1998, p.10). The 'Śakuni' performing the dance of possession in Terukkūttu is more humane than the cold, calculating presence in the great epic. We also note that in 'Daana Veera Shoora Karna' and 'Maya Bazaar', well-known mythological films in Telugu, Śakuni's marginalization and his subsequent revenge through manipulation and plotting is depicted to give a holistic picture.

Similarly, *Thus Spake Śūrpanakhā, so Said Śakuni*, a drama that brings together the two most notorious villains of the Indian epics in a modern setting at the airport, presents Śakuni as an angry young man disillusioned with the system (Sengupta, 2001, p.260). Śakuni is all set to do the unimaginable – he is on a suicide bombing mission. He finds his match in Śūrpanakhā, a villainous female character in *The Rāmāyana*, portrayed in the drama as a young lady who carries the scars of rejection. They are not given names; he is just 'man', and she 'woman', universalizing the pain. There is only one gender - that of a victim. Behind their modern clothes and language, the characters remain the same - disillusioned with the culture of intimidation, exploitation, and violence. Sengupta's Śakuni is suicidal because his 13-year-old sister was raped and murdered by the representatives of the establishment, his brother branded an informer and taken away, never to be seen again - an eerie reminder of the loss of his hundred brothers in *The Mahābhārata*. Displaced and dispossessed, torn between avenging the rape and murder of his baby sister and the guilt of being the cause of death of hundreds at the airport, Sengupta's Śakuni is stuck in a template of abuse that transcends time. He says: "I wanted revenge too...Hot...bloody...fanged revenge" (Sengupta, 2001, p. 262).

He further says:

> I pretended I was the friend of the Kurus...that I was on their side. But I wanted to turn everything to dust. Dust and ashes (Sengupta, 2001, p. 269). It was all part of my plan anyway. I did not let my bloody nephews forget their hate. I coaxed their hatred...fed it...I inflamed it and finally, there was war. (Sengupta, 2001, p.271)

Śakuni is also upset because of the deception of Bhishma which led to his sister Gāndhāri being conned into marrying Dhṛtarāṣtra. He says:

> She wore a dark, thick bloody bandage on her eyes... kept it there all twenty-four hours, all her life. Blinded. Living in constant darkness.... She who was as free as the birds flying across the hills... why did she choose... choose to blot out the sun? (Sengupta, 2001, p.265)

Singh (2009) observes that Sengupta's play foregrounds the injustice done to Śūrpanakhā and Śakuni, and reveals how they have been mistreated by history, their names tarnished, their image ruined, left behind for posterity to question them (p.166). She assesses the role of Śakuni and Śūrpanakhā and finds them victims of the circumstances, rather than perpetrators and predators who are out to create mayhem. She posits:

> Śūrpanakhā represents all those women who are bold enough to remain single and declare their desire for male companionship without taking recourse to false modesty. Such women threaten the male world and so they are described as dangerous rakshasis, who must be controlled/contained/punished before they can upset the patriarchal set up. A woman who expresses her sexuality/sexual desires is branded as a fallen woman. (Singh, 2009, p.166)

Singh (2009) notes that in Sengupta's contemporization of the epic story, it is Śūrpanakhā who convinces Śakuni to give up on his gruesome idea of detonating a bomb at the airport. This re-visiting and re-visioning of the epic saga, to redeem the two much-maligned occupants of the rogue's gallery of Indic myths, makes "Thus Spake Śūrpanakhā, so Said Śakuni" a powerful commentary on marginalization. Reiterating the theme, Singh (1993) regrets that the epic seminars and conferences are dominated by classicists and textualists, and there is no emphasis on non-textual facets of oral tradition (p.174). He says that no account of *The Mahābhārata* will ever be complete till we consider the ever-growing corpus of oral traditions. In that context, it is interesting to note that the marginalized community of snake-charmers in Rajasthan, also called Kālbeliās, worship Śakuni and name their children after him, a practice discouraged in the mainstream communities because of the negative connotations associated with the name. Used as a common noun for people who are devious and scheming, the term 'Śakuni' is almost a slang in the Northern states of India. Yet in a significant departure from this practice, we find the Kālbeliās of Rajasthan situated in a relationship of reverence with Śakuni. While showing how questions of ritual authority, family loyalty and community politics figure in the conversation regarding the agency of gods and spirits, Higgins (2006) discusses the divine presence in the material environment in the Kodamdesar Bhairuji temple in Rajasthan – a space considered sacred by the Kālbeliās, the community of snake-charmers (p. 2). Higgins refers to a meeting with Śakuni Sapera and Raju Nath Sapera, both from the Kālbeliā community and worshippers of the Ādiyogī

Bhairava or Shiva. Śakuni Sapera, a close research interlocuter, took Higgins to Kishangarh for the joint wedding of Raju's daughters. Both Raju and Śakuni grew up as kids in a semi-itinerant Kālbeliā community, charming snakes for a living. In a new iteration of snake-charming, dancing and music related entertainment, they formed a 'Kālbeliā dance party' for some hotels in Jaipur. This upward mobility was unique, as was the nomenclature – naming children after 'Śakuni', a practice actively discouraged by the northern parts of India, but accepted and encouraged, and even divinized by the Kālbeliās. Similarly, Śakuni is accorded the status of a deity in Kerala, where a temple has been constructed at Pavithreswaram in the honour of 'Mayamkottu Malancharuvu Śakuni Maladeva'. Folklores say that this was the place where Śakuni worshipped and propitiated Śiva and prayed for deliverance.

Mohanty (2005) observes that the great epic is not just a poem of lofty themes, superhuman characters and devastating wars culminating in a synthetic peace; rather it is a vast statement on the postmodernist cultural ethos of the post-Vedic times, which has impacted the regional and zonal cultures and bhasha literatures right up to the contemporary times (p.146). "The negativized rhetoric of postmodernism, summed up in the words – discontinuity, dispersal, dislocation, decentering, deconstruction and anti-totalization, are true of *The Mahābhārata* cultural landscape and its enclosed matrices of life -patterns", says he (2005, p.146). He identifies two forces pitched against each other – the negative force embodied by Śakuni, who signifies revenge and devastation, and the positive force symbolized by Kṛṣṇa, who stood for principled pragmatism and enlightened leadership. While Kṛṣṇa stood for stability and order, Śakuni represented anarchy and chaos. Mohanty finds both Kṛṣṇa and Śakuni to be the two geniuses of *The Mahābhārata* – extremely intelligent, far-seeing, and focused, yet where Śakuni was the morbid single-minded revenge hero, Kṛṣṇa was a thinker and philosopher whose primary vision was to set up order in the socio-political milieu of the times. "It is apparent even to a casual reader of *The Mahābhārata* that Kṛṣṇa and Śakuni are the two minds manipulating the politics of power in the epic", says Mohanty (2005, p.148).

Kaul and Gupta (2021) assess the anticipated gain and the ultimate loss of Śakuni, and find him unjustly vilified, when in terms of being a statesman and a strategist, he was at par with Kṛṣṇa and Chānakya, and like them, he was also not propelled by greed (p.186). Studying the character of Śakuni from a managerial angle, Kaul and Gupta reflect on the role of Śakuni in the entire fratricidal war: "Extrapolating the questions to leaders, we ask when is the use of power and politics good and when is it bad? Should leaders be driven by the 'anticipated win' for themselves or what they assume to be right" (Kaul & Gupta*,* 2021, p.187)? Defining power as the ability to influence other people or events, the authors observe that it can be classified in three categories: positional, personal, or relational (Kaul and Gupta*,* 2021, p.199).   Śakuni derived his positional power as a senior minister and as the maternal uncle to the Kauravas, but his real power was relational. It came from his being in the position of a confidant and a mentor to Duryodhana, who had blind trust in Śakuni. By inciting Duryodhana, already a jealous hothead who hated the Pāndavas, Śakuni could garner enough power to proceed on his mission of destruction.   Śakuni's 'personal' power was derived from his unique qualities. He was courageous, determined, a great strategist, skilled and knowledgeable, with a unique gift in the game of dice – he never lost a game. This repertoire of skills was used to bring about the downfall of the Kauravas. "Politics is aimed at motivating

others to work towards what we desire without using force or coercion", say Kaul and Gupta (2021, p. 201), and we see that Śakuni indeed was a strategist par excellence and a master of the game.

4. Of Self-Respect and Social Justice: Śakuni, the Survivor

Zink (2011) describes "self-respect" as the most important social primary good, and considers the lexical significance of liberty in the conception of justice essential for the maintenance of civil society (p. 331). The justificatory function of self-respect and the resultant stability it provides must be examined before we judge Śakuni, who was denied both. The meta-narrative did not give Śakuni his share of self-respect or self-worth, but the re-tellings that have survived the dominant discourse portray a different picture – one of trauma, resilience, retaliation, and subversion, born out of sheer desperation.

Going by this framework, the harsh lines that delineate Śakuni, the rogue, who brought about the great war, soften into a new image - that of a son using power in a desperate attempt to avenge his father's indignity and disgrace, that of a brother who could not erase the memory of his siblings' horrible death, and most important, that of a Kshatriya who was bound by the decrees of the times which required blood for blood. In the mythic narratives analyzed for this study, Śakuni, the 'wily' uncle of Duryodhana, emerges as a victim and a trauma-survivor. He manages to work within a framework of utilitarianism in an age of anxiety that marked his life and times – an age when marriages were mostly political alliances, for example, the nuptials of Arjun, when the learned people in the court were unrighteous, i.e. Bhīshma and Drona, and when the king was as unfair as Duryodhana – in such volatile times, where did a man like Śakuni, who was perpetually wronged and traumatized, stand? To castigate him as a villain would be an under-appreciation of his role as a son, a brother and most importantly, an individual seeking justice on behalf of his family. We notice that Śakuni has been a victim of double marginalization - he is not just the victim of his past, but also the victim of his representation. The negative imagery and the stereotypical portrayal of Śakuni facilitates this dual marginalization of an otherwise wronged and victimized individual. This paper assists Śakuni in finding his voice, lent to him through the re-tellings, folklores and oral traditions based on the great epic.

5. Conclusion

Keeping in mind the detailed study of folk-traditions and other petite narratives undertaken in this paper, we understand that there is a requirement to further explore the character of Śakuni who has been unfairly consigned to the 'Rogues gallery' of the Indic myths. Śakuni's real persona has been erased from the public memory due to selective amnesia, and his villainous image has been retained, to the extent that we are astonished when we hear someone being named Śakuni, as observed in the example of the Kālbeliās. There is a need to investigate why Śakuni continues to be remembered as a negative character who brought about a war, when there is ample evidence that he was himself a marginal and a victim of circumstances. Learning more about *The Mahābhārata* folk and tribal traditions which have been recorded in different parts of India, and also in countries like Sri Lanka, Singapore, Malaysia, Mauritius, Réunion Islands and South Africa,

will delineate the epic trajectory and facilitate our understanding of the subject. It would be fascinating to study the differences in the storyline and the development of the character of Śakuni in the Javanese version of the grand epic, called *'Kakawin Bharatayudhha'*, and one or more of the regional versions of *The Mahābhārata* in India. In this study, we have traced the myth of Śakuni by analyzing the Lyotardian 'petite narratives' that have managed to come down to us despite various constraints. Perhaps these narratives happened to miss being censured by the dominant discourse, which was established by design, and which, at times, smothered variance, opposition, and multiplicity of purpose in its quest for conformity. In these 'petite narratives' we see the character of Śakuni undergoing significant changes. The dancing Śakuni in the Terukkuttu performance, or a gyrating Śakuni in a state of transcendence in the performance of Kathak, or a demi-god Śakuni worshipped by the Kālbeliā tribes - these clash with the stereotype that exists of Śakuni, the evil maternal uncle, and bring us back to our research question: What happened to Śakuni, the great warrior, who is amply acknowledged even in the dominant discourse for his bravery, focus, skills, and erudition? Was the image of Śakuni as the righteous son and grieving brother dropped along the way because he was getting inconvenient to the storyline of the dominant narrative? With a crooked 'langda mama' (disabled maternal relative) to blame for the war, was it easy for the rest to assuage their conscience and take credit of winning the war of Dharma? Where does Śakuni stand vis-à-vis representation and social justice in the dominant discourse? The message of *The Mahābhārata* for the disadvantaged and the downtrodden is that their accounts would also be voiced, and their individualities celebrated. The time has come for us to reassess Śakuni, the archetypical villain for many generations, as a human being, and not as a scapegoat of the war of 'Dharma'. It is pertinent to note that *The Mahābhārata*, as a dialogic text, transcends the easy boundaries of binaries and attests to this complex way of looking at characters and issues, which makes it relevant even today.

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